

Big Deal: Bob Fosse and Dance in the American Musical

***Big Deal: Bob Fosse and Dance in the American Musical.* Kevin Winkler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018; Pp. 368.**

Big Deal: Bob Fosse and Dance in the American Musical by Kevin Winkler offers educators, students, and Bob Fosse enthusiasts a history of the choreographer's early life, creative influences, apprenticeships, and Broadway and film successes. Winkler interrogates how Fosse's passionate and often tumultuous relationship with collaborators, personal partners, and the musical theatre genre, in general, came together to create his indelible style and legacy. *Big Deal* is part of the *Broadway Legacies* series edited by Geoffrey Block that includes Carol Oja's *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* and Todd Decker's *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical*. *Big Deal* is the second book in the series devoted to a choreographer, the first being *Agnes de Mille: Telling Stories in Broadway Dance* by Kara Anne Gardner. Prior to his twenty-year engagement as a curator and archivist for the New York Public Library, Winkler had a career as a professional dancer, and he danced in Fosse's 1982 Broadway revival of *Little Me*. His bodily understanding of dance and keen attention to historical detail bring a fresh perspective to Fosse's work and illuminate why Fosse privileged the dancing body above all else.

To achieve this analysis, Winkler's book traces Fosse's career chronologically across three trajectories: the transformation of the Broadway musical over forty years, the women in his life and their influence on his aesthetic, and "the social and political climate of his era" (2). The first chapter provides an overview of Fosse's dance training and early performance career that shaped his style. Winkler succinctly explains, "While his later work could display touches of sentimentality and pathos, it was the triangulation of vaudeville, burlesque, and nightclubs that formed the basis of Fosse's aesthetic DNA" (17). Chapter two encapsulates Fosse's apprenticeships as a Broadway choreographer, including his work and relationship with Jerome Robbins. Winkler is very insightful in this area as he details how Robbins watched over Fosse and, in turn, Fosse took on this role later in his career with other emerging choreographers. In chapter three, Winkler analyzes how *Damn Yankees* (1955) and *Redhead* (1959) established Fosse and his lifetime muse Gwen Verdon as forces on Broadway. He then charts Fosse's quest for total control over a production through discussions of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961), *Sweet Charity* (1966), and *Pippin* (1972) in the next two chapters.

The book then moves to an investigation of Fosse's work as a film director. Winkler claims "film is the ideal medium for Fosse's perfectionism" (149) and supports this argument by describing, from chapter six and onward, how Fosse worked to incorporate the choreographic on camera. Winkler devotes considerable time to probing the physicality of the bizarre choices that Fosse made (i.e. abrupt moves from reality to fantasy and up-close camera footage of open-heart surgery) to create *All That Jazz* (1979), a film of his life story loosely disguised by name changes.

The book closes with the titular show *Big Deal* (1986) and the legacy that Fosse leaves behind. It is in these final chapters where Winkler explicitly articulates one of the main interventions of the book that has been simmering throughout—how the dancers Fosse worked with, such as Gwen Verdon, Ann Reinking, and Chet Walker, are the embodiment of his work. Winkler contends that, for all of Fosse's tangible achievements and awards, the Fosse style is ultimately about the bodily repertoire and how the technique

has been passed down through generations of dancers. Fosse's legacy consists of "the dancers who hold within their bodies his unique choreographic language" (275).

Overall, the text is well written and thoroughly researched. Winkler's description and analysis of Fosse's choreography and creative strategies are the book's key contributions, particularly given the minimal amount of scholarship that delves deeply into what dance is *doing* in musical theatre. By providing a glossary of dance terms in the preface of the book, Winkler makes a concerted effort to model a method of critically examining dance in musical theatre. Some moments in the body of the text when defining terms, such as "the concept musical" or "Brechtian" are slightly abrupt but much appreciated. There are many backstage tidbits sprinkled throughout the entire book, but Winkler is at his best when exploring Fosse's choreographic process through descriptions of the body in motion. For instance, he describes the dancers in the now famous "Hey! Big Spender" number in *Sweet Charity* as "Undulating and lunging in all directions, they travel like a giant Medusa across the stage before breaking out for a final exhortation" (120). Pointedly, Winkler identifies how Fosse borrowed, revised, and tweaked previous movements as part of his process and, through this sense of repurposing over innovation, the Fosse style solidifies. At his most critical, Winkler explains Fosse's singular vision: "That he was not aware of, or chose to ignore, innovations by his peers that he now claimed for himself made Fosse appear disengaged from what was happening elsewhere in the theatre" (268). Towards the end of the book, Winkler alleges that Fosse cast dancers regardless of race or ethnicity, an unusual practice for the time. Though this topic is not a major throughline to the book, it is worthy of mention in this current era of attempts to diversify casts.

This book will be helpful to students, researchers, and educators seeking to trace the historical chronology of choreographers into director-choreographers. For scholars of musical theatre, this book rethinks Fosse's dedication "to redefine not only how a dancing chorus looked but how it functioned" (73). *Big Deal* also joins the larger conversation that surrounds theatre about the collaborative process and the artistic consequences of turning away from collaboration in search of ultimate control.

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